In The Shadow Of Lovers, Resemblagè, 2015

Artist David Henry Brown Jr. is cutting a head-sized hole into the center of a kitschy, '80s-style neon abstract painting he bought at a secondhand shop in New York City. He is standing inside his Brooklyn studio wearing cutoff jean shorts with no shirt. For the next hour, Brown applies pink face paint, adds or removes object from the tableau, and snaps test shots on his iPhone at every stage along the way. The final touch: an uncooked kielbasa, which hangs from his mouth, held up like a snorkel by a floating green hand. The resulting image is jarring, a little disgusting, but dynamic and well-balanced. This piece will likely be added to the more than 580 others that Brown has posted as @davidhenrynobodyjr to Instagram for his 35,000 and growing followers. In the summer of 2014, he began using the app to host his latest body of work— self-portraits where his face is smeared with condiments or shrouded by stretched nylon stockings stuffed with deli meat.
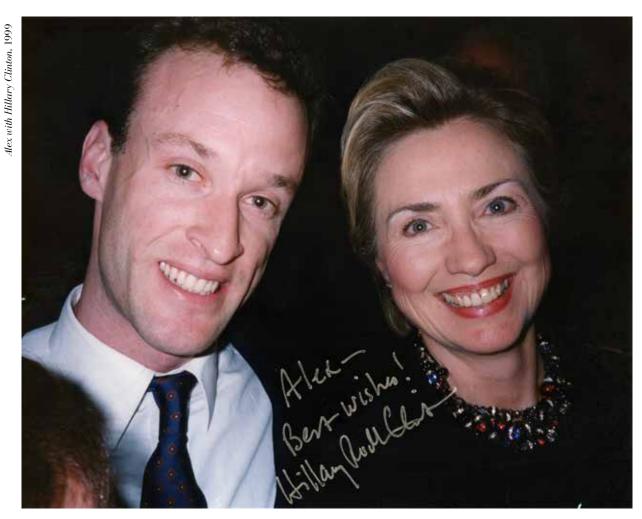
At 48 years old, Brown has spent the last 25 years putting on

Social Sculptor

David Henry Brown Jr. has taken his "disruptive" brand of performance art to social media.

by **MICKEY STANLEY** / photography **BETH GARRABRANT** / artwork courtesy of **DAVID HENRY BROWN JR.**

or stripping away different masks through his performance-driven art. He's embodied and critiqued characters that, at least on the surface, are deeply unlikeable—poseurs of some kind that Brown characterizes as "Fantastic Nobodies."

David Henry Brown Jr. was born into a middle-class family of educators in New Hampshire. After high school, he went to the University of New Hampshire for visual art, where he participated in the senior thesis show and finished one physics credit shy of a BFA. The program emphasized drawing from direct observation. "I quite fancied myself to be like Jackson Pollock when I was 22," Brown reminisces. "I was making these really bad abstract paintings, and I thought it was so rad." He was never going to be Jackson Pollock, but nonetheless, the faculty took a liking to his unorthodox style. "I would take a still life and change the light source and rearrange the objects," he remembers. "I think that was very interesting to them, and they thought I was very promising." After graduation, he fled New Hampshire and moved to New York City.

When he arrived in 1991, Brown began eyeing from the outside the glitzy and pretentious social world of Manhattan's contemporary art scene. At that time, he believed that a "Fantastic Nobody" was "someone that you would see at all the openings that looked like they had it going on, but when you went to their studio, they didn't do anything. It was like a fake person," he explains. Brown grew frustrated with the culture and the exclusivity it came to represent. "I was a young dude, and they told me I was a piece of shit and that I would never make it in New York," he says. Brown equates his emotional state back then to a 1994 Beck song with the refrain: "I'm a loser baby, so why don't you kill me?" But he soldiered on, spending the next eight years making work, some of which he showed at galleries around New York.

In 1999, Brown caught his first big break. He spent an entire year stalking Donald Trump before and after his first presidential run. At that time, Trump had switched parties from Republican to Independent to pursue a more liberal ticket, with left-leaning opinions about abortion, health care, and gay marriage bolstering his campaign. Brown would find out where Trump was going to be, go there, and ask to take a photograph with him. Dressed in a blue blazer, he politely pestered Trump under the guise of a dedicated fan and political ally. Meanwhile, Brown (who cites Marcel Duchamp and the French leftist writer Guy Debord as influences) was reading Marxist theory and becoming increasingly pissed off about high-society New York. As is often the case for Brown, the actual artwork was the year's performance itself. But the subsequent grainy, posed pictures in which the two are embracing—Trump smiling as a matter of form and Brown out of winking disgust—earned the artist some deserved praise amongst his peers.

In that same year, gaining success from the Trump project, Brown upped the stakes by impersonating fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg's son, Alex. And, for a year, it worked. He would go to clubs or celebrity parties disguised as Alex, and New York's social elite were none the wiser. "Alex is a Fantastic Nobody," he says. "That archetype of the celebrity fanatic who kind of has no soul and finds meaning through his associations with these weird celebrity people." Eventually, Brown was found out, but his time as Alex caught

HE HAD MADE THE LEAP FROM CURIOUS DISRUPTOR TO SUCCESSFUL ARTIST.

the attention of the media. To the outside, he had made the leap from curious disruptor to successful artist. "You have to understand, I was on national TV and had more than 15 minutes of fame from it," he shares. "But the reality was that I was broke and I couldn't pay my bills." He was poor, weighed 128 pounds, and had developed a drug and alcohol problem. (Brown is now sober.) What followed was a period of self-doubt, when it became hard for him to fully scrub away the mask he had created. "I became more addicted, which I think is pretty common for celebrities. It's really self-destructive," he says. A reprieve came on Christmas, in 2003, when Brown's sister gave him a Polaroid camera and in turn an opportunity to move behind the lens.

"What really happened was it made me psychotic, being on camera," he admits. At this point, Brown had been living in shitty apartments in Brooklyn for years, working in the beginning at Pearl Paint art shop on Canal Street and later taking freelance art installation gigs to sustain his life as an artist. As an escape from what he describes as the boredom of New York at that time, Brown, along with five of his like-minded friends, began dressing up in weird costumes and crashing parties in Brooklyn "just for the hell of it." The group would become the art collective The Fantastic Nobodies—a moniker that represented their tongue-in-cheek buffoonery but also describes the disingenuous characters Brown has depicted since the early '90s. "It was like a freak-out performance-art *Jackass*, basically. We were more white

HE BEGAN EYEING THE GLITZY AND PRETENTIOUS SOCIAL WORLD OF MANHATTAN'S CONTEMPORARY ART SCENE.

LEFT PAGE: *Yellow Girl*, 2015 Resemblagè   THIS PAGE: *Resemblagè Series* 2015-2016

HIS OBSESSION WITH IDENTITY AND DISGUISE HAS, NOT SURPRISINGLY, LED HIM TO SOCIAL MEDIA.

The Dreamer, 2015 Resemblagè

Quantom Selfie, 2015 Resemblagè

*BROWN CALLS HIS WORKS "RESEMBLAGÈ" (A COMBINATION OF RESEMBLE AND COLLAGE).

trash than those guys even. It was much more low-class," he explains. "Bedford [Avenue] was ours. It didn't belong to tourists. We would terrorize any tourists, actually."

The Fantastic Nobodies provided Brown a kind of safe space to make art and release some demons all at the same time. He was behind the camera now, mostly, documenting their odd happenings around town, many of which required wigs and disguises of various kinds. "One guy would take pillows at someone's house and shove them up his shirt and turn himself into a hunchback," he remembers. "It was just so funny." After years in The Fantastic Nobodies, Brown was able to zone in on his creative identity, and it's had a large impact on the work he's doing today.

Back in his studio in Brooklyn, Brown is washing the pink paint off of his face in the bathroom sink. He has just finished his latest self-portrait, which, along with the others on Instagram, is one part of a lifelong, continuing body of work. These days, his obsession with identity and disguise has, not surprisingly, led him to social media. Brown is not, at the root, a critic of the medium. Rather, he is a curious participant. He checks his phone regularly, scrolling through timelines and engaging with viewers in comment sections. With this new phase, Brown simply hopes to immerse himself in a social system, as he always has, and create art from it and for it. "The expansion of consciousness through being more creative is a spiritual quest for humanity," he says, casually. "It's a good one, I think." ▲

"JUST FOR THE HELL OF IT."

photographed by Beth Garrabrant